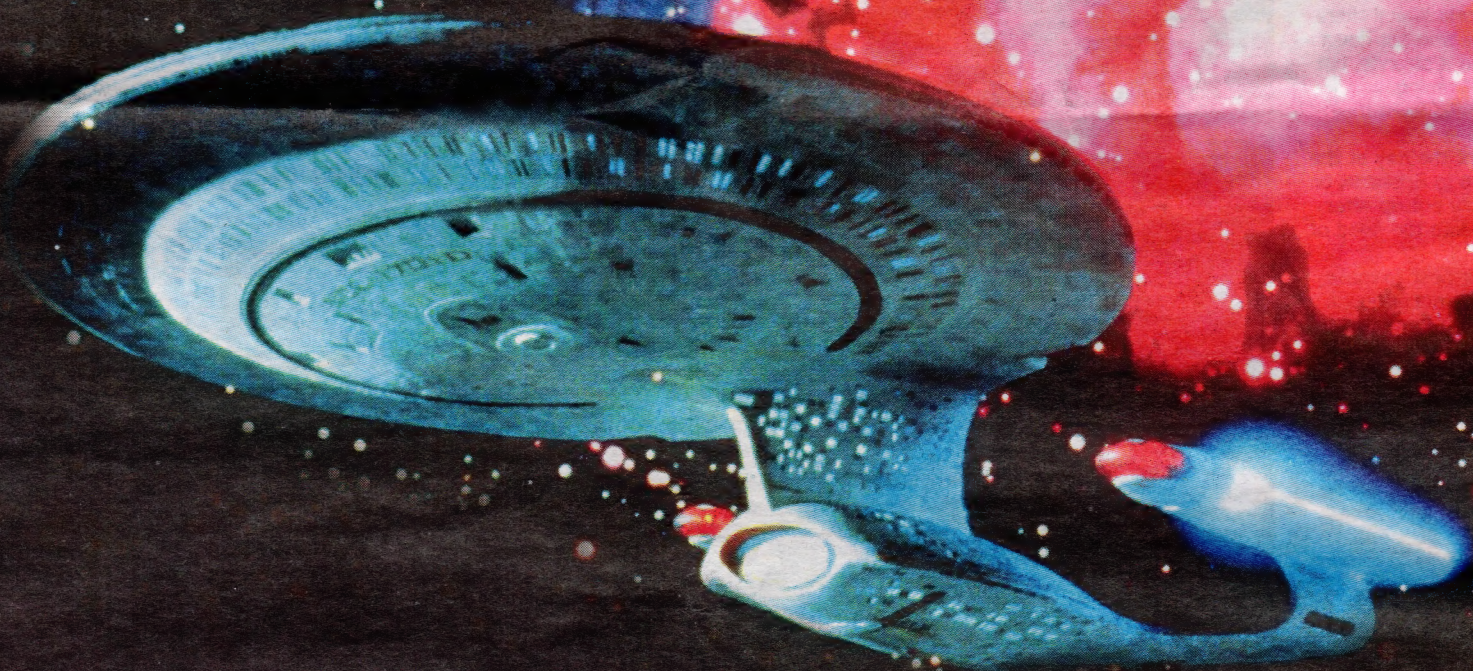


# Parlance of Pandora



**ALIEN TONGUE:** Fictional languages have been created around *Avatar* (below) and (clockwise from main picture) *Star Trek: The Next Generation*; the original *Star Trek*; *The Lord of the Rings*; and the latest *Star Trek* movie featuring Eric Bana as Romulan villain Nero.

The new James Cameron blockbuster *Avatar* is only the latest work of fiction to concoct its own original language, writes Karin Zeitvogel

IN MIDDLE Earth, they speak Elvish; on the final frontier, some speak Klingon. And now on the planet Pandora, they speak Na'Vi.

Pandora is the world created by film director James Cameron for his new movie *Avatar*.

The movie features dazzling special effects, blue aliens, and a brand new language called Na'Vi, which features clicks, glottal stops and unique ways of conjugating verbs, and was created by University of Southern California professor Paul Frommer.

Frommer stayed away from made-up languages like J.R.R. Tolkien's various Elvish dialects or Klingon, crafted for *Star Trek* and which has since spawned an opera and a Klingon translation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

He also avoided taking a lead from Esperanto, arguably the grandfather of constructed languages – tongues which have not been adopted as any country's native language.

"But I didn't start from absolute zero because Jim Cameron had come up with 30 or so words of his own," Frommer says.

"In fact, the word 'Na'Vi' is something that he came up with," he says.

Frommer took the "tiny base" that Cameron had given him and from there developed a language, starting with the sound system.

Na'Vi does not have the "b", "g", "j" or "sh" sounds but does include "sounds which to Western ears are exotic", says Frommer, giving a demonstration of vocalisations called "ejectives", which can best be described as a dulled-down version of the

clicks in South Africa's Xhosa language. Na'Vi has in-fixes in verbs rather than suffixes or prefixes, Frommer says.

For instance, to change the tense of the word "taron", which means "to hunt" – and incidentally is pronounced "gadon" – into the past, future or imperfect tense, "rather than putting something at the beginning or end, you put something right after the t, so various forms appear: tovaron, telaron, tusaron, tairon", Frommer says.

Frommer worked on the new language for several years and was present on the set to coach actors and come up with new words when needed.

At one point during filming, Cameron approached him and said one of the movie's characters was going to recount "an incident he had where he was bitten in his big, blue butt".

Na'Vi's 1000-word vocabulary includes "big" and "blue" but not "butt", Frommer says, but he came up for a word for the slang expression for backside.

Another good Na'Vi word is "skxawng", which means "moron", Frommer says.

The "x" in skxawng represents an ejective.

Frommer pointed out that most of *Avatar* is in English, with only seven of the characters in the movie speaking Na'Vi.

While that will make life easier for viewers, it opens a whole new Pandora's box when the film is distributed internationally.

"When you dub this into another language, you can't have two different voices, one speaking French and one speaking Na'Vi, for instance," he says.

The fuss over the new language was

**Klingon grew from a few words ... into a full-blown language**

probably due to the movie it is linked to and its Oscar-winning director, Cameron, because crafting a new language for a film or work of fiction is nothing new.

Tolkien was making up his Elvish dialects back during World War I, and said that his *Lord of the Rings* series was inspired by the new language, not the language by the books.

A horror film, called *Incubus*, which was released in 1965 and starred William Shatner, who the following year debuted as Captain Kirk in *Star Trek*, was made entirely in Esperanto, a language constructed by Polish eye doctor L.L. Zamenhof in the 19th century.

And then there's Klingon, the language spoken by the eponymous beings in the *Star Trek* movies.

Created by Marc Okrand, a linguist at the University of California, Berkeley, Klingon grew from a few words uttered at the beginning of the first *Star Trek* movie into a full-blown language with its own grammar and vocabulary.

There are Klingon translations of the Bible, Shakespeare and *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu.

There's a Klingon Language Institute, and Klingon can be selected as a language for Google searches, too.

Na'Vi is only in its infancy and hasn't got anywhere near Klingon in terms of a following, but Frommer says he has had dozens of emails from people who want to learn the language.

"If Na'Vi can go where Klingon has gone, that would be fantastic," Frommer says.

